Interviews

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What Is an Interview?

An interview is an oral one-on-one survey or a method of collecting information from an individual through questioning. Interviews are designed to collect information in a somewhat structured manner so that the results can be combined and summarized. Interviews can be conducted in person or over the phone. Skype, Facetime, or other forms of video conferencing also can be a great option. Group interviews are called focus groups.

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What Are the Advantages of Interviews?

Individual interviews are most useful when you want or need descriptive information. Interviews have an advantage over surveys because they allow you to pose open-ended questions and get rich detail from participants. They also allow

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To learn more about **ETR**, visit: etr.org you to ask follow-up questions and engage in a dialogue with each individual respondent. This kind of dialogue can generate an in-depth and personal understanding of complex issues. Interviews also can overcome difficulties due to low literacy in your population. Often interviews are used to provide anecdotal evidence to enhance a more quantitative study.

Interviews also have an advantage over focus groups. They are private and preserve participants' confidentiality.

Interviews also have an advantage over focus groups. They are private and preserve participants' confidentiality. Respondents speak for themselves, without being swayed by others. By contrast, in focus groups, participants may be concerned that others in the room will judge what they say or share comments outside the group. Thus, interviews may be more appropriate when the information is highly sensitive. Additionally, you don't have as many scheduling and logistical constraints, and it's easier to hold remote discussions.

What Are the Disadvantages of Interviews?

Interviews generally reach fewer people than surveys because they are time consuming. They can obtain data from only one person at a time. They also do not allow for the sharing and exchange of opinions and ideas fostered in focus-group discussions.

In addition, because interviews reach fewer people, and the participants are often not selected randomly, the findings are not statistically representative of any particular group. Conclusions based on the data should only refer to the participants themselves and not to the population in general.

Interviews are designed to identify themes raised by individual respondents, not to capture an exact level of agreement across interviewees. Therefore, it is not appropriate to use counts and percentages to refer to what interviewees said.

Interviews vs. Surveys

Interviews	Surveys
• Provide depth over breadth.	• Provide breadth over depth.
• Use small samples but have low generalizability.	• Have high generalizability but require large samples.
• Allow evaluator the opportunity to vary questions or explore answers but lack standardization.	• Are standardized but do not allow researchers to explore answers in depth.
• Generate rich, complex (textual) ideas but are complex to analyze and prone to subjectivity and bias.	• Can be relatively simple to analyze, objective and free from bias but yield less-rich data that typically can be reduced to categories or numbers.

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How Do I Develop and Conduct an Interview?

As you are developing your interview questions, check back periodically to make sure you are effectively addressing your research questions.

There are several important steps to developing and implementing interviews. These include (1) identifying your purpose and objectives; (2) identifying your target population; (3) creating your interview questions; (4) pilot testing the interview guide; (5) deciding on the number of interviews you will conduct; (6) recruiting participants; (7) identifying an experienced interviewer; (8) conducting your interview; and (9) analyzing interview results.

Let's take a look at each step.

(1) Identify your purpose and objectives

The more thought and effort you put into selecting the objectives for data collection in general, and your interview in particular, the more likely you are to collect quality information that will be useful.

Often your development will be guided by a set of research questions. Determine what information you already have about your population of interest and what more you want to know. Be clear about these interests upfront. As you are developing your interview questions, check back periodically to make sure you are effectively addressing your research questions.

Keep the length of the interview in mind when determining the number of different objectives you can cover. Interviews should be short, ideally no more than 20 to 30 minutes. You may sometimes need to conduct a longer interview, but 1 hour should be the maximum.

(2) Identify your target population

Once you determine what you want to know, you need to figure out whom you want to invite to your interview. Are you interested in talking to individuals who live in a particular geographic area, have received a particular service or share a particular characteristic (such as ethnicity or HIV status)? For example, you might narrow your population to "11th grade boys in King County involved in extracurricular sports," or "educators who were trained to deliver after-school program 1 year ago."

(3) Create your interview questions

Once you've identified your research questions or objectives and target population, you can begin developing your interview questions. Write out your questions ahead of time, and use the same core questions for every interviewee.

If you are interviewing a variety of people with different sets of expertise, it's OK to ask additional questions tailored to each individual's insights and experience. However, be sure to include some of the same questions in every interview, and, as much as possible, ask these questions in the same way. The more people who respond to any given question, the better you'll be able to assess whether the information and issues are representative of your actual situation and population.

Here are some things to think about when developing your script.

Create Interview: Interview components

Include essential elements that help participants feel comfortable answering sensitive questions, allow you to gather the kind of information you seek, and give participants a sense of closure before they leave. These elements include:

- An introduction that describes the purpose of the study and the interview. Be sure to discuss the confidentiality of the information shared in the interview.
- Warm-up questions to help the interviewees start thinking about the topic of interest and gradually lead them to your main questions.
- Two to three main question sets based on the topic(s) selected.
- One or two wrap-up questions to mark the end of the discussion and give participants one more chance to share their thoughts and opinions.

Create Interview: Questioning route

Make sure your questioning route or sequence makes logical sense. You want to gradually lead your interviewees to your main questions. You also want to start broad in your interviews, then become more narrow and detailed. Finally, if you are asking interviewees to give both positive and negative points of view, begin with the positive to avoid the tendency to dwell on the negative.

Example of an Effective Questioning Route with Appropriate Script Components

Note: This example is not the complete script for this interview, but a shortened version that illustrates the various components of an effective questioning route.

Warm-up question	Tell me about how often you used the online training.
Topic question #1 (broad)	What did you like best about the online training? What did you like least?
Topic question #2 (more narrow)	How useful were the videos? Tell me how you used them. What recommendations do you have for improving the videos?
Wrap-up question	Is there anything else you'd like to say about your experience with the training?

Create Interview: Transitions

When you create your interview guide, begin discussion of each new topic with an introductory phrase, such as "I'd like to start by talking about what teens do in their leisure time," or "Now I'd like to discuss what teens think about contraceptives."

Create Interview: Question format

Make sure your questions are open-ended. An open-ended question is one that compels the interviewee to give you more than a "yes" or "no" response. Yes/no questions do not encourage discussion.

For example, the question, "Do teens in the community need more factual information about HIV?" invites a simple answer without embellishment. Yes they do, or no they do not.

You summon a much richer, more nuanced response with a question such as, "What kind of information about HIV do teens in the community need?"

Avoid Likert-type items such as, "On a scale of 1 to 5, how much did you like the program?" Such information can easily be gathered through surveys. This type of question wastes valuable time in an interview.

Finally, avoid asking "Why?" questions. They are overly broad and sometimes put people on the defensive. Instead use questions like, "What about X did you like or not like?" or "What was the main reason you did X?"

Examples of Open-Ended Questions

Use Open-Ended Questions	**Wrong:** Do you know how HIV is spread? **Right:** Tell me what you know about how HIV is spread.
Don't Use Likert-Type Questions	**Wrong:** "On a scale of 1 to 5, how much did you like the program?" **Right:** "What are some of the things you liked about the program?" "What are some things you did not like about the program?"
Avoid Why Questions	**Wrong:** Why did you skip breakfast this morning? **Right:** Tell me more about your decision to skip breakfast this morning.

Create Interview: Non-leading questions

Use non-leading questions. These are questions posed in a neutral fashion. They invite the interviewee's opinion without sharing the interviewer's own view or influencing the wording or direction of the answer. For example, the question, "What are your views about abstinence-only education?" opens a world of possibilities without any suggestion that the interviewer has an agenda or opinion. The more leading question, "What are some reasons abstinence-only education is better than comprehensive sex ed?" focuses the answer in a much narrower fashion and might convey the impression that the interviewer is in favor of abstinence-only education.

Create Interview: Prompts

> Interview scripts often include prompts or probes that the interviewer can use to get more information from participants.

After asking your main question, you can ask probing questions to learn more. Interview scripts often include prompts or probes that the interviewer can use to get more information from participants. These may be general prompts such as, "Tell me more about that," "I'm not sure I understand," or "Is there anything else?"

Prompts or probes may also be written to elicit certain responses to a particular question. Let's return to the question, "What kind of information about HIV do teens in the community need?" Imagine a respondent said, "Some teens believe HIV can be prevented with contraceptives other than condoms."

You could ask probes such as:

- "In what situations have you heard about this?"
- "Where do you think the teens got this information?"
- "How is this false information affecting teens' sexual behavior?"
- "What are the best ways to inform teens that this information is not true?"

Examples: 10 Useful General Prompts

- Tell me more about that.
- Please explain your response.
- Go on.
- What else do you have to say about…
- Give me an example.
- Say more.
- Describe that for me.
- What might that look like?
- I'm not following. How can you say that in a different way?
- Please give me more detail.

Create Interview: Interview script layout

Once you've developed all of your questions, lay them out in a clear, simple format that's easy for the interviewer to follow. Use a large, easy-to-read font and leave a lot of white space. Mark clearly where major questions begin and end, and include the suggested time for each question. Leave a large margin down one side to allow space for notes. These might include reminders or prompts for the interviewer, as well as notes the interviewer takes during the interview.

Example of Interview Layout

Note: This example is not the complete script for this interview, but a shortened version that illustrates an effective layout style.

A. Introduction 5 minutes Offer interviewee a copy of the "Background on the Study" handout. Interviewees reviewed this document before consenting to the study. Respond to any questions and affirm interviewee's consent to participate.	Hi, I'm (name). I'm part of the Active Kids study. We're working with your school to find out more about the ways students in your school are physically active. Thank you for helping us out on this. I'd like to start by having you take a quick look at this "Background on the Study." You've seen this before, but I just want to check and see if you have any questions about the study or your participation. I'll be asking you about programs in your school now, attitudes in the school community, and comments students have made about exercise and physical activity. The interview will take about 1 hour.
B. Background 5 minutes	Let's begin. Tell me about any programs that already exist in your school, either during the school day or after school, that get students involved in being physically active. Prompts (as needed): • Who sponsors these programs? • How are the programs staffed?
C. Attitudes 5 minutes	What are some of the ways you see students responding to the current programs? Prompts (as needed): • How engaged are they? • What keeps them from being more engaged? How do others at the school—teachers, staff—respond to the programs?
D. School readiness for change 10 minutes	Now I'd like to learn a little about how you think your school would respond to new programs focused on physical activity. First, let's talk about the students. What are some of the thoughts or feelings you can imagine them having if we brought a new physical activity program into the school?

(4) Pilot test the interview script

Pilot testing helps you fine-tune your interview guide before conducting formal interviews. Pilots give you a chance to try out the questions with individuals similar to those you will interview to see how the questions work. You can find out if respondents are able to answer the questions in ways that yield the information you need, and get an idea of how long the interview will take.

At a minimum, find one or two individuals with similar demographics to your population of interest, and try out the questions with them. As you move through the questions, or at the end of the interview, ask for specific feedback advice for improvement. Revise the interview script based on the testers' comments and suggestions.

In addition to (and prior to) pilot testing, you may need to have your interview questions reviewed by an Institutional Review Board (IRB) or advisory board at your organization or your funder. IRBs review and approve data collection efforts involving human subjects.

This is to ensure that no human subjects are being harmed in any way by participating in the interviews and that all subjects are able to give informed consent to participate. If you need to arrange a review, you will have a detailed application to complete and a clear protocol you must follow. For more information about IRBs, check the **Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP)**

It is important to have your interview script reviewed by a group of people with knowledge about data collection and the population being served.

Even if you are not required to have an IRB review, it's important to have your interview script reviewed by a group of people with knowledge about data collection and the population being served.

(5) Decide on the number of interviews you will conduct

The best way to ensure you have collected as much relevant information as possible is to conduct multiple interviews. Ideally, you keep doing this until you are not hearing anything new.

However, limited resources may not allow for many interviews. In this case, select your interviewees carefully to represent your population of interest. In some cases, you may select key stakeholders or policymakers. In other cases you may randomly select (or otherwise select) a set of participants from a larger group, such as immigrant youth ages 14 to 18, who live in a specific neighborhood.

(6) Recruit participants

Here are points to cover with potential interviewees:

- Describe the project and how the person's knowledge will help you get the information you need.
- Explain that the person's comments will be combined with other interviewees' comments in order to paint a picture of your area of study (for example, the needs and culture of teens in the community, or the understanding of healthy pregnancy in young mothers).
- Promise the person that you will not share his/her individual comments with people he or she knows.
- Explain that individuals' names will not be linked to their comments when analyzing and reporting the data.

- Explain that you will limit the interview to a particular amount of time. Tell the person how long it will take or ask how much time he or she has.
- Discuss any stipends or incentives for participation.

When individuals don't want to do an interview, don't ask why or try to change their minds. Thank them for taking the time to listen to you. You might ask if they know of someone else who might be open to doing an interview.

It is essential to use an experienced interviewer for your project. Interviewing is a skill that takes training and practice.

(7) Identify an experienced interviewer

It is essential to use an experienced interviewer for your project. Interviewing is a skill that takes training and practice. The interviewer must feel comfortable with the questions, know enough about the topic of interest to identify when responses are off target, and be able to elicit responses from interviewees.

Ideally, the interviewer should be someone the interviewees do not know. Most people feel more comfortable sharing sensitive information with someone they will not see again.

(8) Conduct your interview

Keep these things in mind during the interviews:

- **Arrive early and be ready to start on time.** This is an important signal of respect for your interviewee.
- **Thank the interviewee for agreeing to the interview.** This helps emphasize the value of the person's time, opinions, expertise and willingness to be of service.
- **Briefly remind the interviewee about the purpose of the interview.** Even if you have previously discussed the purpose, this brief review can clarify your purpose and help the interviewee focus on the topic.
- **Record what the interviewee shares with you.** Take notes using a copy of the interview guide or a separate pad of paper. You may also want to audio-record the interview and listen to it later to flesh out your notes. If you decide to audio-record, make sure you have the person's explicit consent.
- **End on time.** Again, this is an important sign of respect and reinforces that your interviewee has shared opinions and experience with a trustworthy individual or organization.
- **Thank the person again.** Acknowledge these valuable contributions to an important project. Compensate the interviewee for his or her time.
- **Discuss reports, summaries or publications.** If a summary of the data collected will be shared with those who participated in interviews, tell the person when and how this will be done. If findings from the interviews or the project as a whole will be reported, let the person know how to find out about such reports (check a website, sign up on an email list, etc.).

(9) Analyze interview results

Now is the time to make sense of all the comments and ideas shared with you during the interviews. Ideally, you will find an experienced researcher trained in qualitative data collection and analysis to analyze the data. This person can work with your staff to identify ways to use the data productively.

If it is not possible to involve a researcher, form a team of three or four staff and/or community members to work together to analyze the data, using the guidelines below. Be sure to delete participant names and any other identifiers before the data analysis begins.

The quality of the findings depends not only on having an effective interview script, but on working with a skilled interviewer.

Analyze Interview: Remember the limitations of interview data

Interview data are limited. The number of interviewees is small and the participants generally are not selected randomly. This means that the findings are not statistically representative. It can be difficult to draw definitive conclusions from interviews, or to generalize the findings to a larger group. The quality of the findings depends not only on having an effective interview script, but on working with a skilled interviewer who knows how to guide the process to gather meaningful data.

Analyze Interview: Follow basic steps when analyzing interview data

Despite their limitations, interviews and other qualitative data are extremely valuable in their ability to shed light on themes and sub-themes within and across groups. You will increase your success in interpreting the data systematically and correctly if you can work with someone trained in qualitative data analysis.

There are three steps to follow when analyzing the information in interview transcripts and notes:

1. For each interview question, combine the answers from all participants.
2. Categorize similar answers to identify common themes and sub-themes.
3. Review answers and categories to identify trends, patterns and outliers (values or opinions that are different from the majority), as well as differences between different types of respondents (e.g., teachers, health educators, administrators).

Analyze Interview: Combine these findings with other data

Findings from your interviews should be combined with findings from other data-collection activities. All of the data combined will help you make informed decisions about how to adapt your program, materials, curriculum or other offerings to best meet the needs of the population you are serving, without compromising the core components of your program or materials.

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Summing Up

There are many components to an effective interview. Less experienced individuals and organizations can use the guidelines in this report to develop, implement and analyze simply designed interview protocols that address basic questions. This is a good way for an organization to begin exploring the interview form and build experience in managing qualitative data.

For more complex research questions, consider talking with an evaluation professional. You should be able to determine fairly quickly how elaborate or complex a process is required for your needs. You can decide whether your organization needs additional assistance and, if so, what type.

Gathering good interview data can inform your organization's ability to measure and improve success. If you choose to put the effort into interviews, be sure it is effort well spent by designing and delivering an effective process.

To discuss our evaluation partnerships, contact Dr. Pamela Drake at:
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Reference

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